

“First Semi-Annual Joint Meeting of Cambridge Trustees and Board of the Friends of
the Cambridge Public Library on 2/9/04”
(Notes by Steve Miller)

The meeting started with introductions and an extended discussion of the status of the approval process for the new library building. Everyone’s visible enthusiasm and pride in this project and frustration with the long delays laid a solid foundation for the rest of the evening. The honest and broad-ranging conversations that followed seemed to deepen and strengthen the final feeling that they two groups were partners in a shared endeavor.

A SHARED VISION

We first read the Library’s vision/mission statement and opened the floor for discussion of what people found most significant about the statement. People were moved by many aspects of the Library statement. (I was not yet taking notes at that time, so I apologize for not indicating who said what.) The fact that library resources are free was considered both an important statement of principal and an important fact in terms of equity and opportunity of access. Other people mentioned the diversity of the information, the activity of the extensive set of branch libraries, and the confidentiality of its services. This led to a discussion of the library as an instrument of democracy, a community gathering place, and a source of opportunity for self-development. Most of all, people expressed appreciation for the staff and how much they are able to do with the limited resources available.

It’s important to note that there was total unanimity among everyone in the room about the value and appropriateness of the library’s vision.

VALUES ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Friends

Members of the Friends’ Board were proud about funding the newsletter (“On and Off Broadway”), the museum pass program, and various children’s programs. They were proud of the thoughtful process through which funding was allocated.

Friends were also proud of the way they raised money. The “Secret Gardens” program not only raised money, but also created a tangible sense of community across the city, helping people meet next door neighbors as well as see parts of the city they wouldn’t otherwise know about. In addition, this program increases the visibility of the Friends organization itself – a key need if membership is to grow.

The Friends were also proud of the existence of their organization, which was a positive response to a negative situation several years ago during which people who loved the library decided to not let some library critics define the public debate. After the normal but painful growing pains of the first few years, the Friends has become a more mature and sophisticated organization that serves as a key vehicle for community connection to and support of the public libraries.

Most of all, the Friends expressed their support for the library's staff who are helpful, courteous, and go out of their way to serve the community.

TRUSTEES

The Trustees said they were most proud of their (continuing) role in fighting for the new library building. They feel it is very important to address key policy issues such as confidentiality, censorship, and unfettered access to information in order to provide support for the staff's efforts to live up to the highest ideals of librarianship and democracy. They are proud of their advocacy for the library on many levels and in many venues, from city budget deliberations to state and national laws.

Trustees felt there was a sophisticated and high level of discussion at their meetings and they were proud of their ability to do real work in moving forward important issues. They are also pleased about how many times they are able to actually attend and even participate in Library programs – both because those are good programs and to be supportive to the staff.

ROLES OF THE TWO GROUPS

The Cambridge Public Library is a municipal agency. The City Manager hires and supervises the agency leadership, sets the budget, and sets overall policies.

In that context, the Trustees are volunteers appointed by the City Manager to be a “Super Advisory Board” which advocates for library needs with government and other groups, provides policy-level guidance to senior library staff, serves as a public face and voice of the library, helps build public support for the library, conducts major fund-raising (particularly capital campaigns), and connects to other groups – particularly the Friends!

The Friends of the Cambridge Public Library is a volunteer citizen's organization which raises money through various activities, increases community awareness of the library's programs and public value, builds community among library supporters and Cantabridgeans in general, and uses its money to provide the critical “extras” that make it possible for library staff to creatively serve the city. The Friends can also support initiatives that the Trustees propose in their capacity as Library leaders.

POSSIBLE OBSTACLES TO COLLABORATION – AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

It was immediately clear that the biggest obstacle to closer and more effective collaboration between the Trustees and the Friends was lack of communication. Neither group knew enough about the history, role, and accomplishments of the other.

Better communication and a regular re-affirmation of the shared values and vision will help avoid potential disagreements about funding priorities and keep both groups from feeling slighted by the other.

The new library building will create a unique opportunity for increased public outreach, program-type fundraising, as well as capital campaigns. It will be vital for the Trustees and Friends to clarify the various mechanisms through which people can contribute to the library – e.g. direct contributions to the Friends, contributions to the Library Fund at the Cambridge Community Foundation, etc. – and which mechanism is best under what circumstances.

A number of specific steps were agreed upon to increase communication. The Chairs of both groups will regularly get together (over coffee!). The Trustees will work with the Friends on an outreach campaign to gain additional members and solicit contributions. The campaign will include a letter, perhaps an insert in a local newspaper, and other steps. The two groups will co-sponsor – and attend – some activities such as a holiday party and/or recognition events for the staff. Minutes of the Trustees meetings will be emailed to the Friends' Board (exact manner to be decided later). And there will henceforth be two joint meetings a year, probably in February and October.